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SUBJECT: PUK CRACKDOWN ON ALLEGED HALABJAH PROTESTORS

REF: (A) KIRKUK , (B) KIRKUK 69

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CLASSIFIED BY: Scott Dean, Acting Regional Coordinator, , REO
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. In the wake of the March 16 violent protests in Halabjah, the PUK has confiscated cameras and film, using them to identify perpetrators. Asayish security forces were arresting suspected protestors by conducting raids in the middle of the night wearing ski masks. A source in the Asayish told our interlocutor that the PUK as of March 28 had detained 60 persons in conjunction with the Halabjah events. Islamists thus far have refrained from publicly capitalizing on the protests. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) This is second in a series of cables reporting an in-depth look at the violent March 16 protests in Halabjah. This cable lays out the security crackdown after the protests. Ref A reported on the events leading up to and on the day of the protest. The last cable will report on prospects for violence elsewhere in Kurdistan. RC(A) and IPAO met on March 28 with Yerivan Adham Sa'id, a free lance press interpreter and native of Halabjah, who was present during the entirety of the Halabjah events and supported the demonstrations. Sa'id was the freelance interpreter for the March 17 New York Times story, a subsequent National Public Radio story and was a major source for refuels.

Halabjah Aftermath - Beefed Up Security

13. (SBU) Sa'id said that PUK officials had anticipated that the March 16 protests might get out of control and thus brought in large numbers of Asayish (security forces) to secure the area where the ceremony took place. The protests were over by 1:00. Between 2:00 and 3:00 more forces started arriving. The PUK brought in Peshmerga after 4 p.m. and imposed martial law during the next four days. Sa'id said the PUK installed Peshmerga "every five meters" throughout Halabjah's market area. On March 17, a man (who sustained head injuries) and his four-year-old son were shot, but not killed, when they accidentally drove through one newly established security checkpoint.

14. (C) Sa'id said As Sulaymaniyah KRG Deputy Prime Minister Emad Ahmad and Interior Minister Uthman Mahmud made a joint decision to permit the government to confiscate the cameras and film of those who were present during the protests. Sa'id said the government kept the equipment for three or four days, copied the film, then returned the cameras and the original film to the

owners. Ahmad publicly said that the PUK security forces were using the film to identify the participants and punish them accordingly. Asayish officials themselves also filmed the events.

Ski Masks in the Night: Asayish Arrests Alleged Protestors

15. (C) Sa'id reported that as of March 28 Asayish wearing ski masks were continuing to raid homes at night to arrest and detain suspected protestors. He said the Asayish on March 26 had arrested around 30 people in one neighborhood. Sa'id reported that he had heard through an indirect source that a man recently was able to avoid arrest during a 2 a.m. Asayish raid on his home because his wife and daughters screamed loudly enough to awaken and gather the neighbors. When asked why the Asayish wore ski masks, Sa'id said Halabjah was a small enough place that the Asayish members knew the arrestees' families would otherwise recognize them.

16. (C) The KRG had sent some of those detained to As Sulaymaniyah prison. Sa'id had heard reports that several of Halabjah's young men had fled to the mountains. Some had fled to the Iranian border, bearing arms and fearing detainment if they returned to their homes or school. Sa'id said that a contact in the Asayish recently told him that the Asayish had detained more than 60 individuals; as of March 28, they had released about 6. The KRG had not arrested the ten students who had originally organized the protests and met with PM Fattah (ref B) since they had backed away from the protest before it began.

17. (C) Sa'id said the Asayish was conducting these raids without court orders. Furthermore, NGO's were not allowed to see the detainees, according to press reports. When Sa'id asked a recently released detainee whether he had been beaten, the individual responded, "no comment." With the exception of Hawlati and Awena - the only two independent newspapers - media outlets and the people of Halabjah have not spoken out on

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Asayish injustices because they fear going to jail.

Islamists Remain Quiet

18. (SBU) Sa'id said PUK officials in years past had been able to shift the blame for Halabjah's lack of services to the Islamic activists, saying the Islamic activists prevented the PUK from pursuing reconstruction. Sa'id argued, however, that the claim now was unfounded since PUK and Coalition Forces had cleared Islamic activists from the Halabjah area following Operation Iraqi Freedom. According to Sa'id, the Islamists had only a small presence in the demonstrations and were not driving the events. Most protestors were typical students who did not always obey Islamic strictures. Sa'id said that well over 50 percent of the demonstrators were strong PUK supporters. The 17-year-old boy who was killed came from a family of strong PUK supporters.

19. (C) Sa'id said the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) had supported the students in their protests, but denounced those who destroyed property. Sa'id thought that the KIU had refrained from capitalizing on the protests for fear the PUK and KDP would accuse it of supporting terrorists. The Kurdistan Islamic Group as of March 28 had said nothing publicly about the incident. Sa'id agreed that incidents like the Halabjah protest scored another victory for Islamic groups in northern Iraq.

Comment

110. (C) Sa'id clearly represents a sympathetic view toward the protestors, nevertheless the reports are troubling. Asayish moves to confiscate journalists' cameras and conduct raids in the middle of the night wearing ski masks, if true, show how the

KRG tends to deal with dissent. The Islamists' continue to play a smart game: pursuing a quietist strategy that lets the KRG lose support through its own overreaction and avoids giving any excuse for PUK moves against the Islamic parties.

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